

The issue raised by the petition reminds me of a computer program from the 1980s, in which the computer would play the role of a psychologist. The user would ask questions to the “psychologist,” who (or, really, *which*) would spit out one of a number of recorded snippets. If you asked a very simple question, you would be given a logical, albeit not necessarily helpful, response. As an example, if you said “I’m having a bad day, so what should I do?,” the “psychologist” might say something like “try to do something that you enjoy.” Beyond such insipid dialogue, the “psychologist” confirmed any doubts about its therapeutic qualifications. “This cold weather is making me feel blue, but my parents won’t take me to Florida, so what could I do to perhaps change their minds?” would generate a “response” as helpful and logical as “I’m sure your parents want you to dress warmly today,” “make sure to wear suntan lotion in Florida,” or “I think so, too.”

“Interacting” with so-called soundboard (or “avatar”) technology is like talking to the computer “psychologist.” It is not at all like normal human interaction. Perhaps the Commissioners and staff members should try to have a halfway-intelligent conversation the next time they receive one of these calls; then they would see if the experience is similar enough to normal conversation so as to warrant the Commission’s consideration of allowing what would be sure to exacerbate the public’s already neck-high annoyance with nuisance calls.

There is also the obvious legal point that “an artificial or prerecorded voice” *remains* “an artificial or prerecorded voice” whether or not, to put it figuratively, the “play” button is pressed by a computer or by a person. Thus, the notion that the Commission has discretion here is false.

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